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*Directorate of
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A Guide to Soviet Institutions of Power

A Reference Aid

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A Guide to Soviet Institutions of Power

Executive Institutions

USSR Presidency

In March 1990 the 3rd Extraordinary Congress of USSR People's Deputies (CPD) created the office of the USSR president and elected Mikhail Gorbachev to that post.

The CPD also resolved that, in the future, the president will be elected by the citizens of the USSR on the basis of universal, equal, and direct suffrage by secret ballot. Candidates for the presidency must be between 35 and 65 years old. The candidate who receives more than 50 percent of the total number of votes cast—both in the USSR overall and in a majority of the union republics—will become president. The USSR Constitution stipulates that the president is to be elected for a five-year term; no president may serve for more than two terms. Under the terms of a draft union treaty that has yet to receive the requisite approval from all the republic legislatures, President Gorbachev may face a race for reelection sometime before his current term ends in 1995.

Key Powers of the President

The following are the president's key powers:

- Represents the USSR in domestic and international relations.
- Conducts negotiations and signs international treaties.
- Serves as commander in chief of the Soviet armed forces; appoints and dismisses the supreme command of the armed forces, and awards the highest military ranks.
- In the event the USSR is attacked, may declare a state of war; the Supreme Soviet would subsequently approve the decision.
- May declare martial law in particular localities—but not nationwide—for the defense of the USSR and the security of its citizens.
- May initiate legislation.

- Signs laws; may return a draft law with his objections to the USSR Supreme Soviet for additional discussion and a new vote.
- Issues decrees, which are binding throughout the nation.
- May suspend resolutions and decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers.
- Nominates candidates for ministerial posts and other high state positions for USSR Supreme Soviet approval.
- Appoints and recalls ambassadors.
- Presents annual reports on the state of the union to the Congress of USSR People's Deputies.
- Grants pardons and decides questions of citizenship and political asylum.

Checks on Presidential Power

The Congress of USSR People's Deputies has the right to repeal presidential decrees if they are found to be unconstitutional. It also has the right to recall the president should he violate the Constitution or laws of the USSR.

The president may remand legislation to the USSR Supreme Soviet; however, if the USSR Supreme Soviet confirms its original decision by a two-thirds majority in both chambers, the president must sign the law.

The President may not be a People's Deputy.

Advisory Staff to the USSR President

The president has a staff of full-time advisers on specific issues such as foreign policy, economics, and military policy. He also consults, as necessary, with a group of part-time advisers with expertise on various issues.

USSR Vice-Presidency

In December 1990 the Congress of USSR People's Deputies created the office of USSR vice president and elected Gennadiy Yanayev to that post. In the future the vice president will stand for election along with the president. The first election is scheduled to take place in 1995; the election could be moved up after a new union treaty is adopted. The vice president carries out presidential instructions and takes the president's place when the latter is absent or unable to fulfill his duties. The Constitution stipulates that a popular election for president must occur within three months if the president dies in office or is for any reason unable to continue to execute his duties. In the interim, the vice president serves as president.

Council of the Federation

In November 1990 the USSR Supreme Soviet approved President Gorbachev's proposal to form a Council of the Federation to serve as the USSR's supreme executive policymaking body and to provide center-republic coordination. The Council was intended to give republic leaders greater influence in the national policymaking process. Members include the president, the vice president, and the highest state officials of the union republics (SSRs), thus including RSFSR leader Boris Yel'tsin. The leaders of some republics have refused to attend sessions of the Council and often send a proxy. The highest state officials of autonomous republics (ASSRs) may participate in meetings of the Council, as may the chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet and the chairmen of its two chambers.

USSR Security Council

In March 1991 the USSR Security Council was created to coordinate policies relating to national security and domestic order, including economic, ecological, and interethnic issues. Among the members are the president, the vice president, the prime minister, and leaders of key internal affairs, defense, and foreign policy bureaucracies.

USSR President's Defense Council

The Defense Council unites leaders of institutions such as the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Ministry of Defense, the Committee for State Security (KGB), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the nation's defense industries sector in a small, secretive body whose meetings normally are not reported.

Cabinet of Ministers

Tasked primarily with management of the Soviet economy, the Cabinet of Ministers oversees 47 ministries and state committees, of which 15 may be transformed into state companies, joint stock enterprises, and other new entities during 1991-92. The Cabinet, which is headed by the prime minister, is directly subordinate to the president; it also reports to the USSR Supreme Soviet. Although the Cabinet does not have the right of legislative initiative, it may submit draft laws to the USSR Supreme Soviet via the president. The Supreme Soviet can repeal acts of the Cabinet if it deems them unconstitutional. The Presidium of the Cabinet, which includes the first deputy prime minister and the deputy prime ministers, meets regularly to resolve intersectoral disputes and to set Cabinet policy.

The Cabinet has three standing bodies: two oversee key sectors of the economy (energy and defense industries), and the third is a troubleshooting body created to handle emergency situations such as natural disasters. Key ministries and committees subordinate to the Cabinet of Ministers include:

- Committee for State Security (KGB).
- Ministry of Agriculture and Food.
- Ministry of Defense.
- Ministry of Economics and Forecasting (formerly Gosplan).
- Ministry of Finance.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations

Legislative Institutions

Congress of USSR People's Deputies

The Congress of USSR People's Deputies (CPD), the highest organ of Soviet state power, consists of 2,250 deputies who are elected every five years. In the initial election for the current CPD—held in March 1989—1,500 deputies were elected by popular vote (750 from districts determined by population and 750 from districts allocated equally among the territorial subdivisions); an additional 750 seats were reserved for representatives of all-union public organizations such as the CPSU, the Komsomol, and the Academy of Sciences. Powers of the CPD include:

- Electing the Supreme Soviet and its chairman.
- Adopting and amending the Soviet Constitution.
- Approving the state plan and budget.
- Repealing laws passed by the USSR Supreme Soviet if they are found to be unconstitutional.
- Confirming appointments of key state officials, including the prime minister.
- Impeaching the president by a two-thirds majority vote if he violates the USSR Constitution or laws.

USSR Supreme Soviet

The USSR Supreme Soviet is the Soviet Union's bicameral national legislature. Soviet law stipulates that up to one-fifth of the deputies may be replaced in annual rotations. In the first rotation of deputies (December 1990), however, 40 percent of the original 542 members left the legislature. All but four of them were replaced by deputies rotating in from the CPD. The current Supreme Soviet has 538 members.

Powers of the USSR Supreme Soviet

The following are the USSR Supreme Soviet powers:

- Adopting laws and resolutions.
- Repealing decrees and resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers that have been found to be unconstitutional.

- Approving top appointments in the government.
- Monitoring resolutions of national and republic governments.
- Ratifying the State Plan and Budget and monitoring their implementation.
- Ratifying or denouncing international treaties.
- Passing a vote of no confidence in the government (the Cabinet of Ministers) by a two-thirds majority, thereby forcing the government's resignation.
- Declaring a state of war.
- Imposing martial law or a state of emergency nationwide.

Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet

The Presidium performs a variety of administrative functions. Accountable to the Supreme Soviet, it can also issue decrees and awards, appoint or recall diplomatic officials, and grant pardons. The Presidium includes:

- The chairman of the Supreme Soviet.
- The chairmen and deputy chairmen of the Council of the Union and the Council of Nationalities.
- The chairmen of the joint committees.
- The chairmen of the commissions of the two Councils.
- The union republics and some autonomous republics are represented on the Presidium by one people's deputy each.

Council of the Union

This chamber of the Supreme Soviet handles all-union matters. The commissions of the Council of the Union—reduced in a spring 1991 reorganization from four to two—handle budgetary, labor, and social issues. Commission members are split between Council of the Union deputies and deputies of the CPD who are not currently serving on the Supreme Soviet.

Council of Nationalities

This chamber of the Supreme Soviet is responsible primarily for interethnic issues. The Council's commissions—reduced in a spring 1991 reorganization from four to two—deal with republic and interethnic issues. Commission members are split between Council of Nationalities deputies and deputies of the CPD who are not currently serving on the Supreme Soviet.

Joint Committees of the USSR Supreme Soviet

Joint committees are made up of deputies from both chambers of the legislature, as well as CPD deputies who do not currently serve on the Supreme Soviet. The committees deal with issues such as agriculture, economic reform, health, international affairs, and defense and state security. Many committees oversee ministerial activities; the president's nominees for top ministerial posts must appear before the appropriate committee for approval.

Political Parties and Movements

The Ruling Party: Communist Party of the Soviet Union

As the only political party in the USSR for seven decades, the CPSU was a monolithic organization that influenced every aspect of Soviet society. The emerging multiparty system generated by General Secretary Gorbachev's reforms is pressuring the CPSU to evolve into a competitive party with a diminished role in the economic sphere and with the candidate-and-policy-promotion role that is more typical of Western political parties.

CPSU Congress

The highest body of the CPSU. A 5,000-delegate congress meets every five years. The most recent party congress (the 28th) was held in July 1990.

Central Committee

Policymaking body (currently 412 members) elected every five years by a CPSU Congress. According to the statutes of the CPSU, the Central Committee guides the party between CPSU Congresses. The Central Committee convenes for plenums several times each year.

Politburo

Supreme policymaking body of the CPSU. The CPSU Congress elects the general secretary and his deputy; the remaining members are elected by the Central Committee. The Politburo, which usually has about 20 members, includes, *ex officio*, the first secretaries of the republic Communist parties.

Secretariat

Top administrative body of the CPSU. With the exception of the general secretary and his deputy, the secretaries are elected by the Central Committee. Since July 1990 the Secretariat, which usually numbers about 15, has included a handful of collective farm and industrial enterprise workers to give workers a greater voice in party affairs.

Commissions of the Central Committee

Numbering about a dozen, the commissions submit policy recommendations to the Politburo on subjects such as ideology, international affairs, military policy, nationalities issues, and legal policy.

Departments of the Central Committee

The departments, also numbering about a dozen, are the working bodies of the Central Committee commissions.

Central Control Commission

Created in July 1990 to replace the Central Control Committee and the Central Auditing Commission, the Central Control Commission—which is subordinate to the CPSU Congress—monitors CPSU compliance with the Constitution, especially on issues of methods and finances. It is authorized to appeal to the CPSU Congress decisions of the Central Committee that run counter to the party program and rules. Its 165 members are elected by the CPSU Congress. Members of the Central Control Commission may not belong to the CPSU Central Committee or be workers in its apparatus.

Emerging Opposition Parties

Although the CPSU remains the dominant political party, Gorbachev's reforms and the abolition in October 1990 of the Constitutional article that guaranteed the CPSU's leading role in society have stimulated a proliferation of fledgling opposition parties. Based primarily in the Russian Republic, some of the key new parties are:

- The Republican Party of Russia.
- Social Democratic Party of Russia.
- Democratic Party of Russia.

Democratic Russia

Democratic Russia is an umbrella organization that unites democratic parties and organizations in the Russian Republic. It is not a political party; rather, it serves as a coordinating body, and participating parties retain their independence.

Movement for Democratic Reforms

In July 1991 nine prominent Soviet reformers—including former Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze—founded the national Movement for Democratic Reforms. The founders have said that their goal is to unite democratic parties and movements to ensure the continuation of political and economic reforms. The movement has scheduled its first congress to be held in September 1991; at that time a decision will be made on whether or not to transform the movement into a political party.

SOVIET INSTITUTIONS OF POWER

Organization Overview

